The Witch's Garden

by RUTH CHEW

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The Witch's Garden

Written and illustrated by
RUTH CHEW

Susan looked down into Mrs. Muldoon's garden. It looked quite different at night. "Josh, she's done something to the sunflowers." In the moonlight the big flowers did not look yellow at all. Instead they seemed to shine with a strange light.

Josh reached up and broke off two petals. He handed one to Susan. The petal seemed to move in her hand. Susan stared at it. "Josh," she whispered. "It's growing!"

That tangled, overgrown yard next door seems an unlikely place to find adventure. But when Susan and Josh discover magic lurking in some mint leaves, they suspect that the new owner is a witch. But how can they prove it? The escapades that follow convince them both that old Mrs. Muldoon is indeed behind all the sorcery — until a hidden cave reveals the real secret of the witch's garden.

Another easy-to-read, suspenseful story by the author of *The Witch's Buttons* and *The Magic Cave.*

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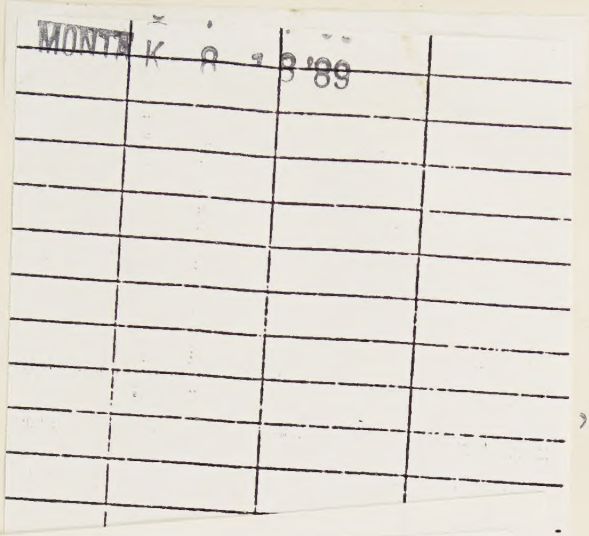
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The Witch's Garden

by RUTH CHEW

Illustrated by the author

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The Witch's Garden

1

"Hot dogs never taste this good when Mother cooks them in the kitchen," Susan said. "It was a great idea to have a picnic in the yard, Josh."

Her cousin grinned. "I have lots of good ideas, Sue." He finished his hot dog and licked his fingers. Then he pushed another frankfurter onto a skinny stick. Josh had cut the stick from the apple tree in the yard. He held it over the little campfire on the flagstone walk.

When the frankfurter was black all over, Josh put it in a roll. He took a big bite.

"Meow!" A fat calico cat jumped off the high board fence between Susan's yard and the one next door. The cat ran over to Josh.

"Okay, okay, Patchwork. I get the message." Josh gave the end of his frankfurter to the cat.

"Now I know why Patchwork likes you so much, Josh." Susan tried to poke her stick through a tiny marshmallow.

"When I was here last summer," Josh said, "Patchwork slept on my bed every night."

Josh bent down to scratch Patchwork behind the ears. The cat rubbed against the leg of his jeans. She looked up into his face and purred.

Josh watched Susan trying to get the stick through the marshmallow. "You'll never do it, Sue. Those tiny marshmallows aren't meant for toasting. My mom uses them to make fudge."

"These were the only ones I could find." Susan went into the house and came back with a big fork. "We can toast two marshmallows at once," she told Josh. "You use one prong of the fork. And I'll use the other."

The little marshmallows kept catching fire. They tasted like cinders. Patchwork sniffed one and went back to the fence.

Susan got a needle and thread. She sat down under the apple tree and strung six marshmallows.

"That looks just like a string of beads, Sue," Josh said.

Susan tied the ends of the thread tightly around a prong of the big fork. "Hold this over the fire, Josh."

The fire melted the marshmallows together into a gooey lump. The lump caught fire. Josh blew it out. The outside of the lump was black. But inside it was soft and bubbly. Josh ate it

slowly. He pulled the thread out and sucked the sticky marshmallow off it. "You're a genius, Sue." He handed her the fork. "Your turn."

Susan tied another string of little marshmallows onto the fork. "The fire's almost out, Josh. And we've burned all the dead sticks from the rose bushes. What'll we use now?"

Josh climbed up into the branches of the apple tree. "There's nothing we can

burn here." He looked over the fence that the cat was sitting on. "Hey, Sue, a dead branch from your tree has fallen into the neighbor's yard. Who lives next door?"

"Nobody," Susan told him.

Josh looked at the house. All the houses on the block were joined together. On the outside they looked alike. But the blinds in this one were pulled down.

"If nobody lives there," Josh said, "noboby would mind if we took some old dead sticks."

Susan looked at the high fence. "How are we going to get over that?"

"If you have a rope, I'll show you," Josh said.

"Mother has some clothesline in the basement," Susan said.

Josh climbed down from the tree. "Come on, Sue. Let's go look for it."

2

Josh and Susan looked all over the basement. At last they found some clothesline on the top of the tall freezer in the laundry room. Susan had to stand on the stepladder to reach it. She handed the clothesline to Josh. Then they went back into the yard.

The cat was sitting in the apple tree. She was looking down into the yard next door.

Josh looped the rope over his shoulder and climbed into the tree. Susan came up after him.

The trunk of the apple tree grew in

Susan's yard, close to the fence. Almost half the tree hung over the yard next door. Josh crawled along a thick branch that hung over the fence. He tied the rope around the branch. Then he climbed down the rope to the yard below.

Susan sat on the branch and moved along sideways. She wasn't as good at climbing as Josh. But she didn't want him to know it. When she came to the rope she grabbed hold of it with her hands. She let her feet hang down and tried to wrap them around the rope. Her hands kept slipping. It seemed an age before she reached the ground.

Patchwork jumped from the branch to the fence. From the fence the cat leaped into the yard next door.

Josh was already snapping dry sticks off the fallen branch. Susan looked at the yard.

A row of tall sunflowers grew against

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the back fence. A cracked cement path went around the yard. Grass poked out of the cracks in the path. The flower beds were full of weeds. A thorny bush was covered with raspberries. And there were little fringed flowers growing next to the cement walk.

The air smelled sweet. Susan knelt down and buried her nose in the soft green leaves of one of the plants. "Josh, what does this make you think of?" Susan held out a leaf for him to smell.

Josh sniffed. "Chewing gum. It must be mint." He broke off several bunches of leaves and stuffed them into his pockets.

"Look at Patchwork," Susan said.

The cat was leaping around the garden. She chased her tail and rolled on the ground.

"She acts drunk," Josh said. "Maybe she got into some catnip."

Susan began to sniff the other plants.

Suddenly Josh grabbed her arm. He pointed to a small window in the back of the house.

Susan saw one of the slats on the venetian blind move. Someone was peeking through the window!

Josh ran to the rope. He climbed up, hand over hand, into the apple tree. Susan was close behind him. She didn't know she could climb so fast.

Josh and Susan heard the squeaky sound of a door opening. Someone was coming out into the yard next door.

The two children crawled along the branch of the tree and slid down the trunk into Susan's yard. Both of them were out of breath.

"Listen," Susan whispered.

Someone on the other side of the fence was laughing.

3

"I thought you said nobody lived in that house," Josh said.

Susan didn't answer. She was staring at the burned-out campfire.

Josh could tell from her face that something was wrong. "What's the matter, Sue?"

"I forgot that Mother doesn't want me to play with matches," Susan told him.

"We weren't playing. We were cooking our lunch," Josh said. "Your mother told us to before she went shopping." He pulled the top from a can of cherry soda. "Don't worry about it, Sue. Let's finish eating and clean up the mess we made." He handed Susan the soda.

They drank the soda right from the cans. Susan ate the marshmallows she had strung together.

"They taste good even without toasting," she said.

When the picnic was finished, Susan got a brown paper bag and a dustpan and brush. She started to sweep up the ashes and burnt sticks while Josh held the paper bag open.

"Do you think we ought to wash that off?" Josh pointed to a black burnt place on the flagstone walk.

"Oh, yes," Susan said. "Daddy put the flagstones down. He wants them to

look nice." She went to get a pail of water and a Brillo pad.

Josh and Susan took turns scrubbing. But they couldn't get the ugly black mark off the flagstones.

"It's no use," Susan said at last. She picked up the big fork. "I'd better wash this."

Josh took a look at the fork. "That needs more than cleaning, Sue."

Now Susan saw that the prongs of the fork weren't shiny any more. The flames had made them turn blue. And the smooth wooden handle of the fork was cracked from the heat of the fire.

Susan knew how much her mother liked the fork. It matched the fancy carving knife. Susan should never have used it over a campfire. And no matter what Josh said, Susan knew her mother didn't want her to build fires. She felt like crying.

Josh looked at her face. "I'm sorry, Sue," he said. "This is all my fault. The picnic was my idea."

Josh dug his hands into his pockets. He pulled out a bunch of mint leaves. Some of them fell out of his hand onto the flagstone walk. They landed right in the middle of the black spot.

Josh leaned over and picked up the leaves. "Sue, look!"

Susan looked at the smoky mark on the flagstones. Where the leaves had been, the stain had vanished.

Josh put the bunch of mint leaves on another part of the smoky mark. Again the dark stain disappeared. He took more mint leaves out of his pocket. Josh covered the whole spot. When he picked up the leaves, the flagstone walk looked as if there had never been a fire burning there.

"I guess there's something in the

leaves that cleans things," Susan said.

Josh crushed a handful of the leaves. He sniffed them. "They smell even more like chewing gum when they're mashed," he said.

"That's funny," Susan said. "Chewing gum sure doesn't clean things." She took the fork into the house.

Josh stuffed all the mint leaves back into his pockets. His fingers were all sticky and smelled of mint. He went to join Susan. She was standing at the kitchen sink scrubbing the big fork.

Susan looked up. "This is ruined, Josh." She held up the fork. "Mother is going to be angry."

"It's too late to do anything about it now, Sue. Let's just put it back where it belongs." Josh grabbed the fork with sticky fingers. "Where does your mother keep it?"

"In the buffet in the dining room. Come on. I'll show you." Susan took a red leather box out of the top drawer of the buffet. Josh put the fork into the box beside the carving knife.

Before she closed the lid of the box Susan took another look at the fork. "Josh!" she whispered. "Something's happened to it!"

Josh looked. Where his sticky fingers had held the handle, the wood was smooth and gleaming. All the ugly cracks were gone.

Josh couldn't believe his eyes. He touched one of the blue prongs. At once it shone like silver.

Josh picked up the fork and rubbed his fingers all over it. Then he handed it to Susan.

She stared at the shining fork. Then she put it in the box and closed the lid.

4

At suppertime Susan's mother said, "Bill, did you know we have a new neighbor?"

Both Susan and Josh stopped eating to listen.

Susan's father put down his fork. "You mean the Kerrigan house has been sold at last? Nobody has lived there for years."

"I don't think it was really *sold*," Mrs. Allen told him. "I heard that the owners are letting someone live there, just so the house won't be empty. Her name is Mrs. Muldoon."

"Well, I hope she cleans up that messy back yard." Mr. Allen cut open his baked potato. "By the way, Mary," he said, "what did you do with yesterday's *Times*? I haven't finished the crossword puzzle."

"I left it in the living room," Mrs. Allen said.

Josh looked at Susan. They both knew they had used the newspaper to light their campfire.

When it was time for dessert, Josh helped Susan clear the table. "Where did you put the paper bag with the ashes in it, Josh?" Susan whispered to him.

"In the kitchen waste basket," he said.

Susan reached into Josh's pocket and pulled out all the mint leaves. She opened the brown paper bag and dropped in the mint. Then she closed the bag tight and began to shake it.

Her mother walked into the kitchen, carrying a platter. She opened the refrigerator. Suddenly she caught sight of Susan. "What in the world are you doing, Susie?"

"Shaking a paper bag." Susan opened the bag. Josh pulled yesterday's *Times* out of it.

Mrs. Allen put what was left of the meat loaf in the refrigerator. She took the newspaper from Josh. "I'd better take charge of this," she said. "There's no telling what you and Susie might do with it."

5

After supper Susan and Josh went upstairs to Susan's room at the back of the house. Josh stood at the window and looked out. It was still light outdoors.

"From here you can't tell that there's anything spooky about the yard next door," he said.

Susan walked over and looked down. "Look, Josh," she whispered, "there's the witch!"

A woman in a rusty brown dress was digging in a shadowy corner of the garden. She was small and thin and worked so quietly that Josh hadn't noticed her.

"Witch?" Josh said. "You mean Mrs. Muldoon."

"Don't you see, Josh," Susan went on in a low voice. "Mrs. Muldoon *is* a witch. You know that we were mixed up with *magic* today."

Josh nodded. "The mint leaves are magic all right. But that garden has been here for a long time. Mrs. Muldoon just moved in next door."

Susan didn't argue. She stared down at the woman and wondered what her face was like.

Josh was quiet for a while. The sky was getting darker. A firefly flashed in the apple tree. "Sue," Josh said at last, "what gave you the idea to use the

mint leaves to get back the newspaper? I thought they were just good for cleaning things."

"I'm not quite sure what gave me the idea," Susan told him. "It just came into my head."

They heard Mrs. Allen calling. "Susie, Josh, come down here."

They left Susan's room and went downstairs. As they came closer to the kitchen Josh sniffed the air. "My favorite smell," he said.

Susan grinned. "I know. Chocolate cake."

Mrs. Allen came out of the kitchen. "Surprise, surprise," she said. "I baked two cakes, Josh. One for you, and one for our new neighbor. Before you kids eat yours, I want you to take a cake over to Mrs. Muldoon."

6

"You don't like me to be out after dark," Susan reminded her mother. "Couldn't we take the cake to Mrs. Muldoon tomorrow?"

"What are you afraid of, Susie?" Mrs. Allen asked. "You only have to go next door. And Josh will be with you."

"Mrs. Muldoon is working in her garden, Aunt Mary," Josh said. "We saw her from the window. She won't hear her doorbell."

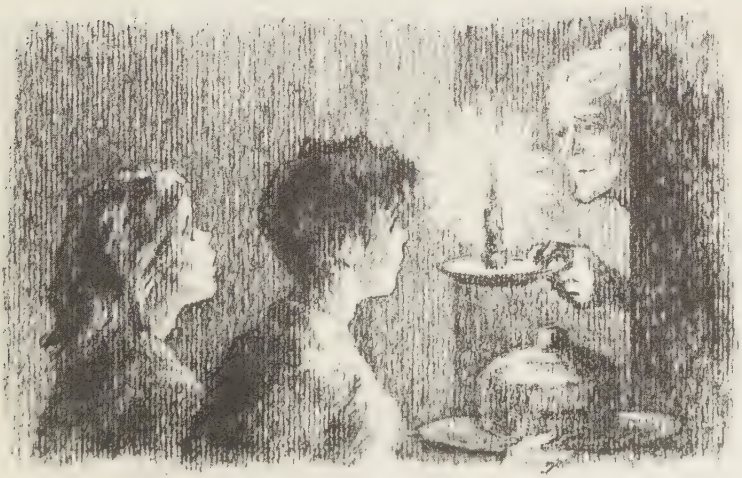
"Ring it for a while then. I'd like her to get the cake when it's fresh out of the oven." Mrs. Allen handed Josh the big cake dish with the glass cover. "Just be careful how you hold it. Now run along. You can have a piece of your cake when you get back."

Josh and Susan left the house by the front door. They walked down the front steps and up the steps next door. Josh was carrying the cake. Susan pressed the doorbell.

It was dark now. The street lights were on. But there were no lights in Mrs. Muldoon's house.

"She must still be out in her yard." Susan was just about to push the doorbell again when the door creaked open.

A small woman peeked out. She was holding a candle. By the flickering light her wrinkled face looked very very old.



Susan swallowed. Then she said, "I live next door. My mother baked a cake for you. Here it is."

Josh held out the cake plate.

The little woman looked at her candle and then at the big plate. "Thank you," she said. "Would you please bring the cake in for me."

She opened the door wide and held the candle high to light the way. Josh stepped into the dark hall. "You too, dearie," Mrs. Muldoon said.

Susan followed Josh into the house.

The candle cast strange shadows. Susan and Josh saw that the walls were covered with dark old paintings. There were cobwebs hanging from the carved frames.

Something small and furry brushed against Susan's ankle. It ran away into the darkness before she could see whether it was a mouse or a rat.

They walked into the dining room. Josh put the cake plate on the big table.

Mrs. Muldoon set her candlestick down beside the cake. She opened the glass door of the tall breakfront. Then she took out three old plates with curly gold borders. Mrs. Muldoon laid the plates on the table and opened a drawer

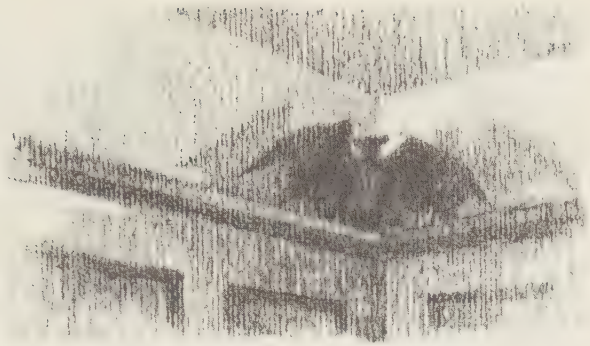
to get three heavy silver forks. "You'll have some cake before you go."

"Mother baked a cake for Josh too," Susan said. "She wants this one to be all for you."

"Cake tastes much better when it's eaten in company." Mrs. Muldoon took the cover off the cake dish. She pulled out a chair with claws on the ends of the legs.

As soon as the cover was taken off the cake the whole room smelled of chocolate. The smell was even stronger than it had been at home. Susan's mouth began to water. She sat down in the chair with the claws.

Mrs. Muldoon pointed to a chair with a red velvet seat. "You may sit there, Josh." She picked up a knife that was shaped like a dagger. She started to cut the cake.



7

The single candle flickered in the middle of the table. Shadows danced on the cracked ceiling. Susan saw something on the narrow shelf above the oak panels. It looked like a bat.

"Why do you use candles?" Josh asked. "Did the electric company turn off your power?"

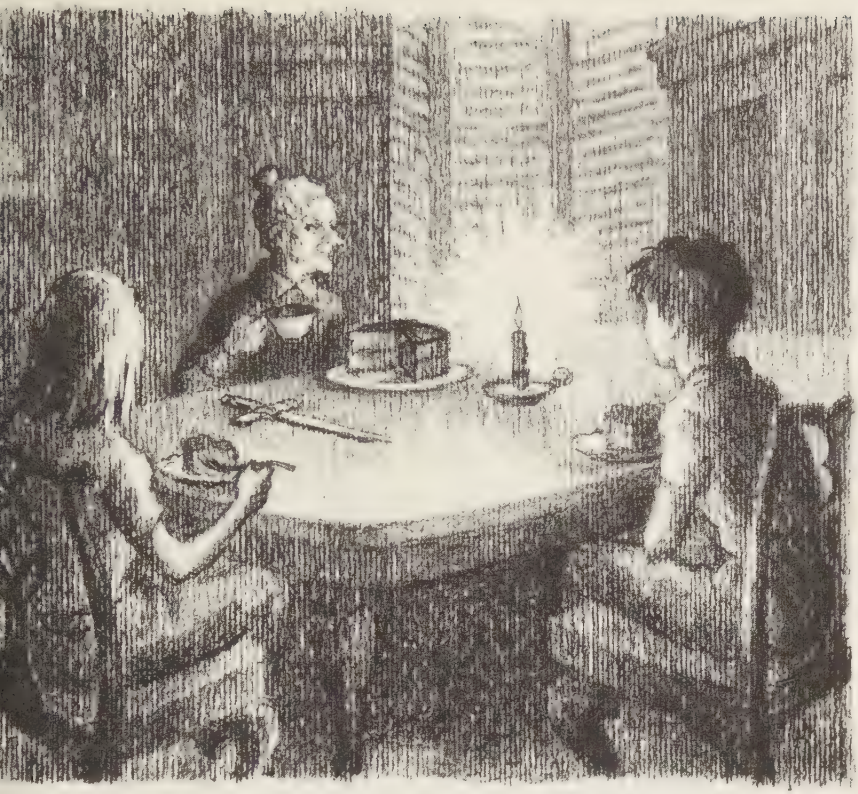
Mrs. Muldoon nodded. She looked around at the shadows and smiled a funny smile. "But anyway I *like* candles."

Mrs. Muldoon was sawing away at the cake with her dagger. She cut three very crumbly pieces. Susan and Josh each got a fat wedge. But Susan noticed that Mrs. Muldoon gave herself a very small piece of cake. When she tasted it Mrs. Muldoon looked as if she felt sick. She went into the kitchen and came back with a steaming cup of something that didn't smell like tea or coffee. Mrs. Muldoon took a sip. She seemed to feel better at once.

"I hope you'll forgive me for not offering you anything to drink," she said. "There's no milk in the house. And this wouldn't be good for you." She took another sip from her cup.

Josh finished his piece of cake. Mrs. Muldoon sawed off another big hunk and gave it to him.

"We saw you working in your garden," Josh said.



"It's in terrible shape," Mrs. Muldoon told him. "No one has been taking care of those poor plants."

"Who planted them?" Susan asked.

"My Aunt Martha," Mrs. Muldoon said. "She liked all sorts of strange

flowers. I don't even know what some of them are. There are some tall things at the back with big yellow flowers on them."

"Those are sunflowers," Susan said.

"Oh, sunflowers. I've heard of them before. Why would Aunt Martha want to plant *them*?" Mrs. Muldoon frowned. She seemed to be thinking hard. Suddenly she smiled, as if she had an idea.

Susan licked the last chocolate crumb from her fork. She stood up. "We'd better go home. Mother will wonder what's taking us so long. Thank you for sharing your cake with us."

"My pleasure, dearie," Mrs. Muldoon said. "I hope you'll come back again. Maybe there are some other things we can share."

8

"What took you so long?" Mrs. Allen asked when she opened the door. "I thought you'd rush right back to eat your cake."

"Mrs. Muldoon wanted us to stay and eat cake with her," Susan told her mother. "She said it tasted better when you had somebody to eat it with."

Mrs. Allen nodded. "She must be lonely all by herself in that big house."

"She asked us to visit her again, Aunt Mary," Josh said. "She's a nice old lady."

"Well, I guess you've had enough cake," Mrs. Allen said. "You'd better go on off to bed. It's getting late."

"I'd like a glass of milk," Susan said. "Mrs. Muldoon didn't have any."

"There's plenty in the refrigerator,"

her mother told her. "Just be sure you turn off the light in the kitchen when you're finished. Daddy and I want to watch a movie on television." She went into the living room.

Josh and Susan walked into the kitchen. Susan put two glasses on the table and took a container of milk from the refrigerator. "Josh," she said, "what do you suppose Mrs. Muldoon was drinking? It smelled funny."

Josh poured milk into the glasses. "Stop it, Sue. You're getting ready to make up a whole story about Mrs. Muldoon. Next thing you'll start in with the witch stuff again."

"Didn't you see she never really ate any cake, Josh?" Susan said. "You know witches only eat toads."

Josh laughed. "Don't be silly, Sue."

"Have you forgotten the magic mint leaves?" Susan asked.

"Mrs. Muldoon didn't plant that garden." Josh felt in his pocket. "Hey, Sue, you used all the leaves to put the newspaper back together."

Susan ran to the kitchen waste basket. "Mother must have thrown out the trash. The paper bag is gone."

9

Susan lay awake for a long time after the lights were out. She kept thinking about Mrs. Muldoon and the magic mint leaves. Whatever Josh thought, Susan was sure Mrs. Muldoon was a witch.

Suddenly Susan remembered something. She sat up in bed.

The house was quiet. Susan didn't waste time looking for her bedroom slippers. She tiptoed down the dark hall in her bare feet to Josh's room.

A faint light glowed in his bed. Susan pulled back the sheet.

Josh jumped up. "Oh, it's you." He was reading a book with a flashlight under the sheet. "I found this in the bookcase downstairs. It's so exciting I couldn't stop reading."

"Sh-sh," Susan whispered. "Josh, we left my mother's clothesline hanging down into Mrs. Muldoon's yard."

Josh closed the book. He was always ready for action. "Okay, Sue. Let's go get the rope."

The cat was curled up on the foot of Josh's bed. When Josh got up, Patchwork jumped to the floor. She followed Josh and Susan down the stairs and slipped out of the back door after them.

The moon was just rising over the row of houses behind the yards. Susan was first up the tree. She was sorry she hadn't put her sneakers on. But she didn't want to go back for them now. She wished she was wearing pajamas

like Josh. A nightgown wasn't the best thing to climb trees in.

Susan sat down on the branch that had the rope tied to it. She slid along sideways over the fence and into the yard next door. Just as she was about to untie the rope, Susan looked down into Mrs. Muldoon's garden. It looked quite different at night.

Josh crawled along the branch behind her. "The yard's not as messy as it was."

"The witch has been working in it." Susan pointed to the tall plants against the back fence. "See, Josh. She's done something to the sunflowers."

In the moonlight the big flowers did not look yellow at all. Instead they seemed to shine with a strange white light. Susan thought they were the same color as her mother's pearl earrings.

"It's just the moonlight, Sue," Josh said. "Come on. I'll show you."

Susan climbed down the rope into the garden. Josh was right behind her.

They walked along the cement path until they came to the back fence. Susan looked up at the big flowers. They were higher than her head.

Josh reached up and broke off two petals. He handed one to Susan.

The petal seemed to move in her hand. Susan stared at it. "Josh," she whispered. "It's growing!"

10

Josh looked at the petal he was holding. It grew bigger and bigger. Then it stopped and floated in the air. He held onto it with both hands. "Sue," he said in a low voice, "I feel funny."

Susan felt strange too. It was just as if she didn't weigh anything. Her petal was now almost as long as her arm.

A little breeze stirred the leaves of the apple tree. Suddenly it blew Susan off her feet. She was so surprised that she let go of the petal. At once she fell to the ground.

She stood up. Now Susan felt just as heavy as she always did. The shining petal was still floating right over her head.

She saw that Josh was holding tight to his petal. He seemed to have trouble

keeping his feet on the ground. The next thing Susan knew Josh was climbing onto the petal. Then he stood up on it.

The breeze sent both the flower petal and the boy sailing across the moonlit garden. Josh bent his knees and leaned forward. He flew back to where Susan was standing. "Look, Sue, a flying skateboard!" Josh went floating across the yard again.

It looked like such fun that Susan wanted to fly too. The petal still hung in the air above her. Susan took a deep breath. She stood on tiptoe to grab hold of one end of the petal. As soon as she touched it she felt lighter than a feather. Her feet drifted off the ground.

The petal started to rise. Susan held onto it with both hands. She pulled herself up and sat down.

Under her the petal felt silky smooth and bouncy. Susan didn't want to stand up on it as Josh was doing. Instead she held onto each side and swung her feet back and forth. It was like being on a swing. If she leaned back the petal rose higher. When she bent forward it flew down.

Susan began to enjoy herself. She flew high over the apple tree and down into her own yard. Patchwork was sitting on the flagstones.

"Meow!" The cat stood on her hind legs and batted at the flying petal with her front paws.

Susan bent over and picked her up. She put the cat on her lap and flew back over the fence into Mrs. Muldoon's yard.

The breeze blew through Patchwork's whiskers. She arched her back and sniffed the air. The cat seemed to like flying just as much as Susan did.

Josh was trying to do tricks. He leaned far over to one side to make a sharp turn. "Oops!" One of his feet had slipped off the petal. Josh stood on the other. He flew over to Susan. "Isn't this great?"

"Watch out!" Susan said.

The petal tipped to one side. Josh slid off. He grabbed the petal as he fell and held on with both hands.

The cat saw what was happening to Josh. She became so excited that she dug her sharp claws through Susan's thin nightgown.

"Ouch!" Susan flew down to the ground. She put the cat on the cement walk. "Sorry, Patchwork. I'll take you for a ride when I'm wearing jeans."

The cat jumped onto the side fence and sat there watching Josh. His sunflower petal was flying round and round the garden now. Josh was still holding tight to it. But he was being pulled

through the air behind the petal.

Susan flew to Josh. She reached out and took hold of his petal. It stopped still and floated in mid-air.

Josh climbed back on it. "Thanks, Sue." He sat on the petal as if he were riding a horse. "Giddyap!"

The petal flew forward.

All of a sudden Susan saw something. She flew after Josh and grabbed him by the arm.

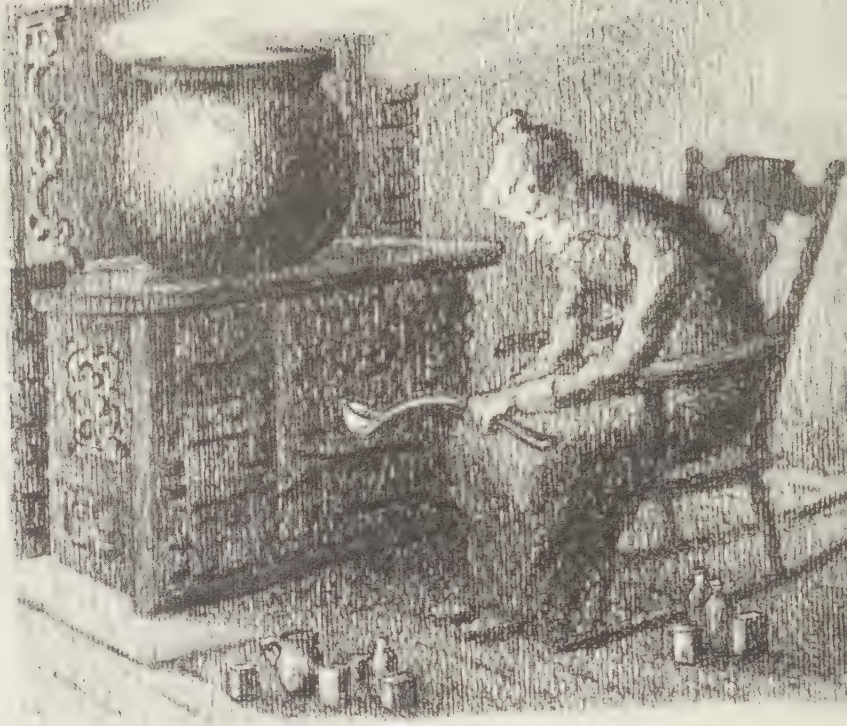
"What's the matter, Sue?" he said.

"Sh-sh!" Susan pointed to Mrs. Muldoon's house.

A faint light shone through a crack in one of the venetian blinds.

"That must be Mrs. Muldoon's kitchen," Josh whispered. "Let's go see what's going on in there."

Susan and Josh flew over to the window and peeked through the crack in the blind.



11

A candle was burning on the kitchen table. By its light Susan and Josh could see a big old-fashioned stove. There was an iron pot on the stove. It was so large that it covered all the burners.

Josh stared at the big pot. "You're right, Sue! She *is* a witch!"

Mrs. Muldoon was fast asleep in a rocking chair beside the stove. A lot of little cans were on the floor at her feet. The cans looked like those in Mrs. Allen's spice cabinet. But these were old and rusty. There were three dusty bottles and a chipped jug on the floor too.

Mrs. Muldoon was holding a soup dipper in her hand. She smiled in her sleep.

All at once the big pot gave a hiss. It started to boil over. Susan and Josh saw the witch open her eyes. She jumped to her feet and turned off all the burners on the stove. "Now, let me see," she said. "What did I put in here?"

She dipped out a little of the brew in the pot and sniffed it. "Very interesting," she said. "But it needs something." Mrs. Muldoon walked over to a cupboard on the wall and took out a small stone jar. She walked back to the stove and poured

something dark and green out of the jar into the big pot.

Bang!

Josh and Susan thought the big black pot was going to explode. The kitchen began to fill with yellow smoke. Mrs. Muldoon ran to her back door.

"Come on, Sue!" Josh backed his petal away from the window. He flew over the fence into Susan's yard.

Now Susan heard Mrs. Muldoon's back door creak. The witch was coming out into the yard.

Susan swung her legs wildly. She flew after Josh. She caught up to him on the other side of the fence.

"We left my bedroom window open," Susan gasped.

Susan and Josh flew up to the window. They rushed through it so fast that they banged into each other and fell to the floor.

Susan got to her feet. She reached up to grab her petal. But it floated up in the air. Josh's petal was rising too. Both petals hit the ceiling at the same moment.

Pop! They broke like a pair of balloons and came drifting down.

Susan picked them up off the floor. They were damp and curled and no bigger than any other sunflower petals.

12

"Wake up. It's getting late." Mrs Allen pulled down the sheet. "Susie! Didn't you take a bath last night?"

Susan looked down at her feet and legs. They were scratched and dirty from climbing the apple tree.

Her mother walked over to the window. "There's Mrs. Muldoon working in her garden. What a job that must be! The yard hasn't been weeded for years."

Susan looked out of the window. The witch was trying to dig up a large bush with an old spade.

"Go take a shower, Susie," her mother said. "Your Dad has already left for work. I'd better wake Josh. You children are wasting the best part of the day." She went down the hall to Josh's room.

When Susan and Josh came down to the kitchen, there was a batch of pancakes all ready for them. They sat down to eat.

Mrs. Allen poured two glasses of orange juice. "I offered to lend Mrs. Muldoon our garden fork. I'd like you to take it over to her."

Susan and Josh finished their breakfast. They went down into the basement to look for the garden fork. It was in the furnace room along with the spade and the rake.

Josh picked up the fork. "I'd like to get back into that garden," he said.

"Even though we know Mrs. Muldoon is a witch?" Susan asked.

Josh grinned.

Susan was quiet for a minute. She really wanted to go back into the garden too. There must be all sorts of magic in a place like that.

"How about it, Sue?" Josh said.

Susan picked up a trowel. "I'm ready."

They went out by the basement door under the front stoop. Susan climbed the steps of the house next door and rang the doorbell. She had to ring several times before the door opened.

Mrs. Muldoon stood in the doorway. Her hands were covered with dirt. She

looked hot and tired. Her white hair curled in damp little rings around her wrinkled face. And her long pointed nose was sunburned. But when she saw the two children she smiled.

Josh handed her the garden fork. "Would you like some help in your garden?"

"Oh, yes," Mrs. Muldoon said. "I have some seedlings that are all ready to be planted. Come in."

Josh and Susan stepped into the house. Even in the daytime it was dark and shadowy inside. Mrs. Muldoon walked down the hall into the dining room.

Josh pointed to the chocolate cake on the table. "She hasn't eaten any more of it," he whispered to Susan.

Mrs. Muldoon went through the swinging door into the kitchen. Josh and Susan followed her.

The big pot was still on the stove. But

now there was no steam coming out of it.

Mrs. Muldoon put down the garden fork. She pulled a green plastic watering can from under the table. The witch took the watering can to the stove and used her big dipper to fill it from the pot. When it was full, the witch carried the watering can out into the garden. She set it down on the stone step outside the back door.

Mrs. Muldoon came back into the kitchen. She pointed to a flat box of dirt on the table. There were little green plants in the box. "These are my seedlings."

"What are they?" Susan asked.

Mrs. Muldoon rubbed her chin. "I'm not sure yet what they're going to be," she said. "Plants change, you know. I'm going to water these with a new mixture."

She handed the box of plants to Josh. Susan picked up the fork, and they all went out into the garden.

13

Josh set the box of little plants down on the cracked cement walk. "Hand me the fork, Sue." He turned to Mrs. Muldoon. "Where do you want me to dig?"

The witch leaned over the box. She poked one of the plants with a bony finger. "If you're what I think you are," she said, "you won't want too much sun." She looked around the garden.

Susan looked around too. The sunflowers against the back fence looked just like any other sunflowers.

"Josh," Susan whispered, "we forgot to take the rope off the apple tree."

"Apple tree?" The witch looked at it. She didn't seem to notice the rope. "The

very place," she said. "There's nothing growing under that branch. We could plant the seedlings there."

Josh set to work with the fork. He dug a round flower bed in the shade of the tree. Susan used her trowel to pick the stones out of the soil. She chopped up the big clods of earth.

Mrs. Muldoon got down on her hands

and knees and planted the seedlings. She was very careful with all of them. And she seemed to have something to say to each one. It took her a long time. But at last she was finished. She stood up.

"There now," she said, "I'm ready for a snack. And I'm sure you are too." The witch walked over to her kitchen door. She went into the house and came out again with the chocolate cake. She set it down on the stone step outside the door.

Mrs. Muldoon looked at the cake and rubbed her chin. "Now, what else do I need? Oh, yes, plates. And forks." She rubbed her long chin again. Then she smiled. "And my knife." She turned to go back into the house. "Just wait here, children."

"For a witch she's mighty forgetful," Josh said.

Susan was looking at the new flower bed. Some of the tiny plants were droop-

ing. "Mrs. Muldoon worked so hard to plant them," Susan said. "But she's forgotten to water them."

Josh went to get the watering can. He came running back with it. The big garden fork was lying across the cement walk. Josh tripped over it and the watering can flew out of his hand. Both Josh and Susan were splashed.

"Take it easy, Josh!" Susan said. "You've got me wet all over."

"I'm soaked," Josh said. "I didn't think the watering can had so much in it."

Susan grabbed hold of Josh's arm. "Look at your feet!"

Josh looked down. Now he saw that both he and Susan were standing up to their ankles in a deep puddle.

Everything around them was different. They were in the middle of a wide concrete road. On each side of the road was a thick jungle of strange trees.

14

Josh looked around. "Sue, where are we?"

"I don't know," Susan said. "But let's get out of this puddle."

There were puddles all across the road. Susan and Josh walked around them. The concrete was split into deep ditches. Thin, tall plants were growing in the ditches. A huge log blocked their way. At first Susan and Josh tried to climb over the log. But there were no toe-holds in the wood, and they kept slipping off.

"We'd better go around it," Susan said.

They walked in the shadow of the log until they came to the end.

"It seems to be some sort of telephone pole that has fallen down. But it's much bigger than any telephone pole I ever saw." Josh pointed to four flat metal prongs that curved off the end of the log. "It looks just like the garden fork, Sue."

Susan stared at the prongs. Then she looked up. For a minute she didn't say anything. Then she whispered, "Josh, it *is* the garden fork!"

"How did it get so big?" Josh asked.

"It didn't," Susan told him. She pointed overhead.

High above them were thick leafy branches. The smallest leaf was as big as a bedspread. A huge rope hung down from a great branch.

Josh saw something else too.

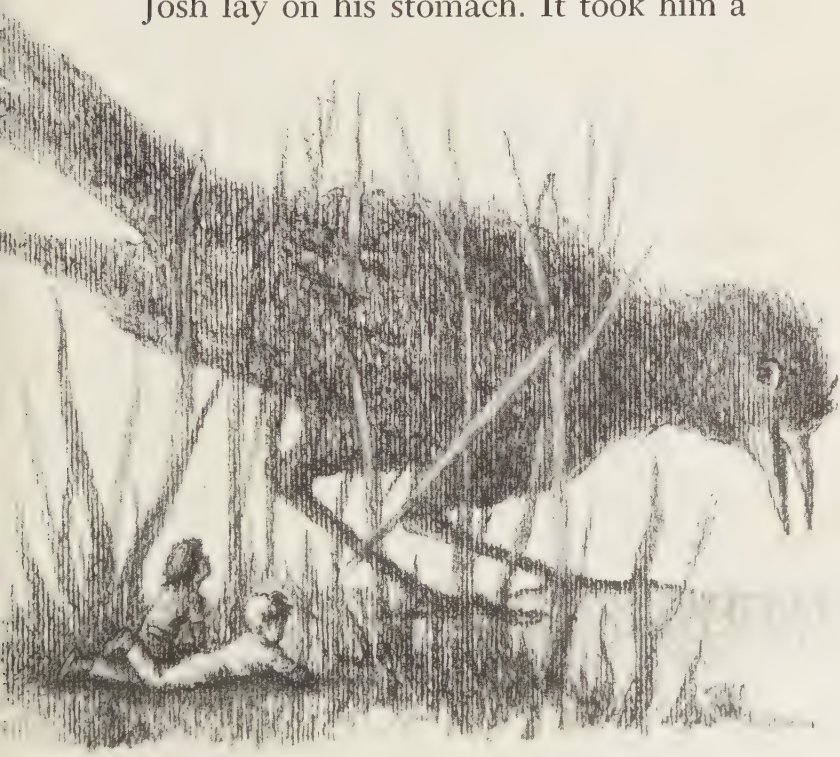
There was no time to lose. He grabbed Susan and pulled her under a tangle of green stems.

A second later a swirl of rusty black feathers dived after them.

Susan and Josh crawled deep into the underbrush. They peered between the leaves.

A giant starling was standing on the concrete road. He cocked his head and tried to see into the jungle where the children were hiding. His yellow beak looked very sharp.

Josh lay on his stomach. It took him a



little while to get his breath back. Then he said, "I see what you mean, Sue. The fork didn't get big. We got small!"

Susan nodded. She had been thinking. "Josh," she said, "it must have been the stuff in the watering can that did it. Mrs. Muldoon took it from the pot on her stove."

"The witch's brew!" Josh said. "Those puddles were just drops from the watering can." He peeked out at the concrete road. "The drops are almost dried up by the sun already. That concrete road is really the witch's garden path." Josh felt the green tree trunk beside him. "This is a weed."

The starling hopped back and forth. He pecked at a beetle. But the beetle wiggled under a stone. The bird got tired of waiting for Josh and Susan to come out of their hiding place. He flapped his wings and flew away.

The children stayed very still in the weeds. "What are we going to do, Josh?" Susan asked at last.

"I don't know." Josh stood up and stretched. He shinnied up a green stem. "Hey, this is fun." Josh chinned himself on a smooth branch.

Susan saw a shiny yellow flower. She stood on tip-toe to get a better look at it. "Mother pulls these out of our garden. But when weeds are as big as this they're beautiful."

Josh was hanging by his knees now. Susan decided to climb one of the bigger plants. She stayed close to the main stem and stepped where the leaves branched off it.

Up and up she went. At the top of the stem she came to a fringed red and white flower. Susan climbed onto it and sat down.

All around her was the smell of cloves.

A bee landed on the flower beside her. Susan didn't move. The bee poked her velvety head into the center of the flower. Susan watched her until she flew away.

Suddenly the flower began to shake. Susan held onto it so as not to fall off. She looked over the edge.

Josh was climbing up. He was in a hurry. "There's an ant chasing me, Sue."

15

"An ant?" Susan laughed. "Josh, you're bigger than an ant."

"This guy looked mean. You should have seen his jaws." Josh climbed up onto the flower and sat next to Susan.

Something leaped over their heads. Susan and Josh ducked.

A grasshopper had landed on a leaf near where they were sitting.

"I wish I could jump like that," Josh said.

Susan watched a blue butterfly. "Wouldn't it be fun to ride on him?"

Josh shaded his eyes and looked across the garden. "Hey, Sue, look what's growing over there." He pointed.

"Raspberries," Susan said. "And they're bigger than we are!"

Josh was already climbing down from the flower. He had forgotten all about the ant.

Susan waited until Josh reached the ground before she started down. Some of the leaves of the plant had been kicked off. It was harder to go down than it had been to climb up.

Josh looked out at the wide concrete road. "I'd rather walk on that than through this jungle."

"The birds will go for us if we come out from under the weeds," Susan reminded him.

"We don't have to come out from under the weeds." Josh pulled a penknife from his pocket. He cut through the stem of a leafy weed. Then he handed the weed to Susan. "Use this like an umbrella." Josh began to cut another stem.

Josh and Susan held the weeds over

their heads. They stepped out onto the road. Susan wondered what the birds would think about walking weeds. She was ready to dive back into the jungle at any minute. But the huge birds went on twittering in the branches of the apple tree high overhead. They didn't seem to notice the children.

Josh and Susan marched along what seemed to be a road. It was really the cement path. And it led them to the witch's back door.

Josh took a look at the chocolate cake. "Wow!" He climbed onto the stone step.

Susan looked at him. "Wait a minute, Josh. Don't you think you ought to take your sneakers off before you step on the plate?"

Josh leaned over to help Susan climb up. Then they both pulled off their sneakers and walked barefoot onto the cake plate.

They had to be careful not to step in the patches of gooey icing. The cake looked like a wall of chocolate crumbs. Josh and Susan sat next to it. They held their weed umbrellas over their heads with one hand. With the other hand they dug into the wall.

Neither of them had ever eaten so

much cake. But no matter how much they ate it didn't make a dent in the wall.

At last Josh wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "I've had enough cake to last me the rest of my life."

"So have I," Susan said. "And I'm thirsty. I wonder what we can drink."

"How about raspberry juice?" Josh suggested.

Susan stood up. "That bush is halfway across the garden. We can walk off some of the cake. Put your sneakers on, Josh."

16

Now that they had the weed umbrellas Josh and Susan felt much safer. They walked along the path in the warm sun. Susan watched the shadow of her leafy umbrella on the concrete. The raspberry bush stuck up out of the weeds.

Suddenly something leaped off the high board fence between the yards. "Look out, Josh!" Susan dived into the weeds at the side of the path.

Josh wasn't quick enough. A monster cat pounced on him.

"Patchwork!" Susan screamed.

The cat didn't seem to hear.

Josh lay on the ground between the cat's front paws. One of her sharp claws dug into the sleeve of his polo shirt. He couldn't get away.

"Don't move, Josh." Susan tried to sound calm. But her heart was thumping like a hammer.

She grabbed the nearest weed and began to shinny up. It was only a thin stem of grass. And it bent under her weight.

Susan climbed all the way to the top of the stem where the grass turned to tassels of seeds. The seeds kept falling off. It was hard to get a grip.

The cat put her face down near Josh. She opened her mouth. Susan saw the sharp white teeth coming closer and closer to Josh. She let go of the tassels and made a flying leap.

Susan landed right between the cat's ears. Patchwork raised her head and shook it. Susan almost fell to the ground. But she grabbed hold of the cat's fur and hung on tight.

Still holding on, she crawled over to one of Patchwork's ears. It was like a tent with a curtain of long hairs over the doorway.

Susan stood up and pushed her way through the curtain. She put her hands to her mouth and yelled as loud as she could down into the cat's ear. "Patchwork! Don't you know Josh?"

The cat seemed to think she had a flea in her ear. She shook her head so hard that Susan fell down. She rolled out of

the cat's ear and grabbed one of the whiskers over Patchwork's left eye.

The cat was staring at Josh. Again she put her face down next to him. Her pink nose twitched.

Susan couldn't bear to look. She shut her eyes. Then she heard a sound like a motor boat. What was it? Suddenly Susan knew.

Patchwork was purring!

Josh screamed. "Take it easy, cat!"

Susan opened her eyes. Patchwork was licking Josh's face with her huge tongue.

"Help!" Josh yelled. "Susan, *do* something!"

Susan let go of the whisker. She started to slide down the cat's nose. Halfway down she used her feet as brakes. Susan stopped sliding and stood up. She waved her arms.

Patchwork stared at her with crossed

eyes. The cat reached up a paw to brush Susan off her nose.

Susan jumped. She landed in a patch of weeds and hid under a clump of grass.

While the cat was looking at Susan, Josh wiggled out of his polo shirt. He rolled away from Patchwork's paw. Then he got to his feet and dived after Susan.

The cat sniffed the little shirt that was still caught on one of her claws. She shook her paw until the shirt fell off. Patchwork stood up and stretched. She yawned and walked away down the path.

Susan heard her mother calling. "Patchwork! Chow time!"

The cat jumped onto the fence and down on the other side.

17

For a few minutes neither Josh nor Susan said anything. Susan waited until her heart stopped thumping. "Are you all right, Josh?" she asked.

"I seem to be," he said. "But that cat's tongue is just like sandpaper. My face is sore all over."

"I'm still thirsty," Susan said. "And I don't feel like going out into the open — even with a weed umbrella."

"I don't either," Josh said. "But I'd better get my shirt." He peered out from between two stems of grass. A fuzzy caterpillar was crawling across the cement walk toward the shirt. Josh jumped out of the weeds. He grabbed his shirt and ran back to where Susan was waiting.

"That's the kind of caterpillar that gives me hives."

Susan laughed. She looked at Josh. "Three hives would cover all of you."

"It's not funny, Sue." Josh put on his shirt.

"If we walk through the weeds we ought to come to the raspberry bush." Susan began to push her way between the green stems.

It was rough going. Sometimes Josh had to use his pen knife to cut a path between the plants. At last they saw the raspberry bush sticking up out of the jungle ahead. The berries looked like bunches of round juicy red balloons. Susan could almost taste them. Her mouth began to water.

"Last one to the raspberry bush is a rotten potato!" Josh began to race. He ran around big weeds and jumped over small ones.

Susan tore after him. She had almost caught up when Josh tripped over a root. Susan was running too fast to stop. She fell right on top of him.

Both of them tried to get up to start the race again. They rolled over each other and into a patch of soft green leaves.

"What's that smell?" Susan sat up and looked around. The jungle was gone! She was sitting in the sunlight in the witch's garden. Josh was next to her.

"Chewing gum." Josh picked a leaf from the plant they were sitting on. He held it under her nose.

Susan stood up. The raspberry bush was only a step away. She picked two little ripe berries and handed one of them to Josh.

"I can't help wishing," Susan said, "that we'd rolled into the magic mint leaves *after* we'd eaten the raspberries."

18

The back door banged. Mrs. Muldoon had come out into her garden. She looked at Susan and Josh. "I see you like raspberries," she said. "I never cared for them myself. I was wondering if I should dig up that bush."

The witch held a tray with plates and forks and glasses on it. There was a pitcher on the tray too.

Susan and Josh ran over to help. Mrs. Muldoon gave Josh the pitcher. He was careful not to spill what was in it.

"Would you like to cut the cake, Susan?" Mrs. Muldoon handed her the dagger knife. "Don't bother to give me a piece." The witch set the tray on the stone step. "You can pour the milk, Josh."

"Milk?" Josh almost dropped the pitcher.

"Oh, dear, don't you like milk? That's too bad! I made a special trip to the store to buy it for you. That's what took me so long. I never keep milk in the house. But I was sure you'd want some with your cake." The witch thought for a minute. Suddenly she smiled. "Maybe you'd like something else to drink?"

"We *love* milk!" Susan started to cut the cake. She made the pieces as small as she could.

Josh poured two glasses of milk. He and Susan sat down on the stone step to drink it.

Mrs. Muldoon saw the watering can lying on the path. She picked it up and looked inside. "Empty. That's funny. I was sure I'd filled it." She carried the watering can to the back door.

Josh and Susan stood up to let her go into the house. As soon as the back door closed behind the witch, Josh scraped the cake off his plate into a patch of weeds. "I can't eat any more cake today," he said.

"Neither can I." Susan dumped her cake into the dirt. She dug it in with the trowel.

They both finished drinking their milk.

Mrs. Muldoon came out of the house with the watering can. She looked at the empty plates. "How about a second helping?"

"No, thank you," Susan said.

Josh put his glass on the tray. "We've had plenty, Mrs. Muldoon."

The witch walked slowly along the garden path looking at the plants. "I'm not at all sure I should water them with this mixture. It's something new. I don't know what it will do." She turned to

Susan and Josh. "I try to be careful. But sometimes things go wrong. My Aunt Martha was always making mistakes. She had a lot of trouble with this garden. She moved away a long time ago. I never found out why." Mrs. Muldoon put down the watering can and picked up the garden fork.

"I'll help you with that," Josh said.

The witch handed him the fork. "Do you see that bush over in the corner?"

"You mean the one with the long trailing branches?" Josh asked.

"Yes. It looks sad. I think it might be happier in a sunny spot," Mrs. Muldoon said.

"That's the bush you were trying to dig up this morning," Susan said. "Mother and I saw you from my window."

"I couldn't get anywhere with my old spade," the witch told her. "Maybe you and Josh can do better."

19

Josh and Susan took turns with the fork. It was like trying to dig into a rock. The ground around the weeping bush was packed hard.

Mrs. Muldoon stroked one of the long trailing branches. "Got you trapped in there, dearie, have they?" she said to the bush. "We'll get you out."

Susan thought the bush perked up a little. A breeze caught the branches and set them dancing.

"Sue," Josh said, "there are a lot of

stones around this bush. If we pull them out it will be easier to dig."

Susan ran to get the trowel. She set to work to help Josh dig out the stones. They were several inches under the ground. Josh pushed the fork down and wiggled it next to a stone. Susan used the trowel to scrape the dirt away. Together they dug up the first stone.

After that it was a little easier. One by one they took the stones out of the dirt. They made a pile of them beside the bush.

Mrs. Muldoon walked around her garden. She stopped to talk to some of the plants.

"The stones are in circles, Josh," Susan said. "Somebody put them here on purpose — "

"So nobody could dig up the bush!" Josh looked at the ground. "Maybe there's a treasure buried here."

Susan shoved the trowel down as hard as she could. Josh stamped on the fork to push it into the dirt.

Mrs. Muldoon was singing. "The flowers that bloom in the Spring, tra-la—"

The pile of stones grew bigger and bigger. At last Josh was able to dig the fork down deep. Mrs. Muldoon came over. "Be careful of the tap root," she said. "That's the big one in the middle."

The bush was wobbly now. Josh pushed the fork right under it. The witch took hold of the main stem and gently lifted the bush out of the ground. She laid it on the garden path. "It won't be long now, dearie," she said to the bush.

"Where are you going to plant it?" Susan asked.

"Oh dear. I forgot. We should have made a new hole to put the bush in before we dug it up." Mrs. Muldoon began

to trot around the garden, looking for just the right sunny place.

Josh grabbed Susan's arm. He pointed to the hole in the ground where the bush had been.

Susan saw that dirt was falling from the sides of the hole into the middle. But it didn't fill up the hole. Instead the hole was getting bigger. And it was deep. They couldn't see the bottom.

Now Josh and Susan saw that there were steps in the hole.

"How about planting the bush over here?" the witch called from the other side of the garden. "There's plenty of sun." She looked at Josh and Susan. They were still staring into the hole in the ground. Mrs. Muldoon walked over and peered down into the hole too. She stroked her long chin and said nothing.

"Josh thinks there's a treasure down there," Susan told the witch. "If we find

it you could pay your electric bill."

"We'll need a candle to explore the underground cave. There's one on your kitchen table." Josh ran to the back door.

Mrs. Muldoon leaned over the hole and sniffed with her long nose. Then she stood up straight and looked at Susan. "I haven't had a really exciting adventure in years. This ought to be fun."

20

Josh came running back with the candle and some kitchen matches.

The witch took them from him. She struck a match and lit the candle. Then she put her bony hand over the little flame. "I don't want the breeze to blow it out," Mrs. Muldoon said.

She lifted the skirt of her rusty brown dress above the tops of her shoes and stepped down into the hole. Josh came after her. Susan was last.

The steps were made of rough stones, like the stones they had dug out of the garden. Susan and Josh had a hard time to keep from tripping. But the witch walked down with no trouble. She held the candle high to light the way.

The sides of the hole were made of stones too. Here and there a little stream of water ran down over them. As they went deeper into the earth the air began to feel damp and cold.

Mrs. Muldoon walked more quickly than Josh and Susan had thought she could. She almost danced down the stairs ahead of them. Every so often she lifted her long pointed nose and sniffed the air. Twice she stopped to put her hand to her ear. She seemed to be listening for something.

At the bottom of the steps they walked into a tunnel. The walls of this too were made of stones. Now the air became warmer. Soon it was much too warm. Even the stones under their feet began to feel hot.

The tunnel led to an iron door. Mrs. Muldoon touched the doorhandle with her bony finger. "Hot!"

She handed the candle to Josh. "Hold this a minute, dearie." She wrapped several folds of her baggy brown skirt around the doorhandle and tried to turn it. "Locked," the witch said.

Susan saw something lying between two stones on the ground at her feet. She picked it up.

It was a rusty iron key.

Susan tried the key in the door. The key fitted. But Susan couldn't get it to turn. She wiggled it. Still it didn't turn. Then, just as Susan was about to give up, the lock clicked. Mrs. Muldoon pulled the door open.

A blast of hot air hit them. All three jumped back.

Josh stared into the room on the other side of the door. "It's like an oven in there."

At first there seemed to be no light in the room. Then they could see a red glow

in the darkness. It began to get brighter. And it came nearer.

Suddenly it was blazing. They saw a huge slimy creature. It had bulging eyes, sharp claws, and a long tail.

Mrs. Muldoon backed away from the open door. "Run, dearies," she said. "It's a dragon!"

21

Josh dropped the candle.

Susan raced back through the dark tunnel. She could hear Josh pounding along behind her. Mrs. Muldoon came after Josh. The heels of her shoes tapped on the stone floor.

The dragon made no noise. But Susan knew he was not far away. She could feel the hot blast of his breath as he slid through the tunnel in back of them.

It seemed forever before she reached the bottom of the steps. Susan turned around to see if Josh and Mrs. Muldoon were still coming. She couldn't be sure of anything except that the dragon was getting closer. He was like a fire in the darkness.

Someone crashed into Susan. She fell to the ground.

"Are you all right, Sue?" Josh pulled her to her feet.

"Yes." Susan started up the steps.

A faint light came from overhead. Susan climbed as fast as she could. She was out of breath. And her heart was thumping so hard it hurt. But she kept going.

Twice Susan fell on the slippery steps. She scraped her knee on the rough stones. Up and up she went. At last she

climbed out of the hole and into the open air.

A few seconds later Josh came up into the sunshine too.

Susan blinked in the bright light. She turned around to look at the hole in the ground. "We'd better get ready to close this up as soon as Mrs. Muldoon comes out."

"The hole is too big now for that bush we dug out of it." Josh looked around for something to block up the hole.

"What's taking Mrs. Muldoon so long? I thought she was right behind us." Susan leaned over and looked down the steps. "It's dark in there. I don't see the glow from the dragon."

Susan felt a chill run down her back. She looked at Josh. His face was white.

"Sue," he said, "we have to *do* something. The dragon must have caught Mrs. Muldoon!"

22

"We'll need a light to get down those steps," Josh said. "I'll see if I can find another candle." He ran over to the house and went into the kitchen.

Susan looked around the garden. The watering can was on the cement path where Mrs. Muldoon had left it.

Susan walked over to the can and looked in. It was half-full of something.

Josh opened the back door. "I found a candle and matches but no candlestick."

Susan ran to the stone step. She handed Josh one of the plates they had used for the cake. He lit the candle and dripped wax onto the plate. Then he stuck the candle into the wax.

Susan went back and picked up the watering can.

"Careful, Sue!" Josh yelled. "You'd better not fool with that!"

"It's our only chance," Susan said. "Come on, Josh." She walked over to the hole and started down the steps.

Josh came after her with the candle. "Maybe I ought to go first."

"No," Susan told him. "If I spilled this stuff on you the candle would shrink."

"So would I," Josh said. He thought for a minute. "Sue, don't you think we ought to go back and get some of the magic mint leaves?"

"We've wasted enough time already. I just hope we're not too late now." Susan began to walk faster.

The steps were slippery. Susan kept telling herself, "I won't fall. I won't fall."

It seemed a very long time before they came to the bottom. Josh cupped his

hand over the flame of the candle. "If the light's not too bright," he whispered, "maybe the dragon won't see it."

At the foot of the steps Susan felt something soft under her feet. She bent down and picked it up. "Josh, look!"

Josh held the candle close to Susan's hand. She was holding a burned piece of brown cloth.

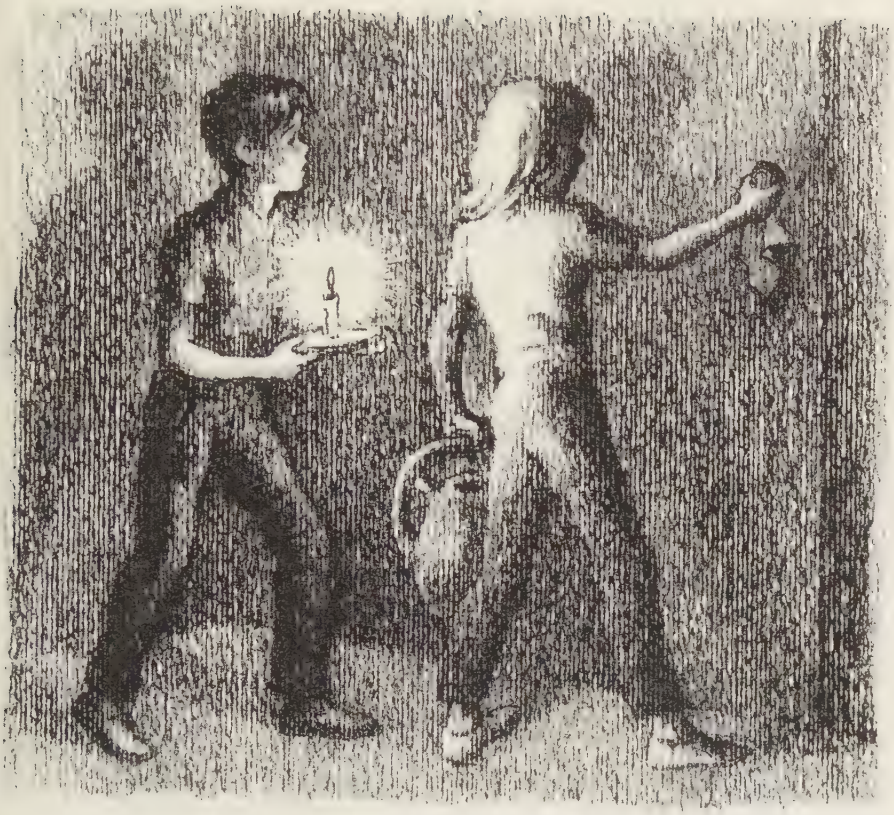
"That's Mrs. Muldoon's dress," Josh said.

"All that's left of it." Susan tried to keep her voice calm. She felt sick. She put the piece of cloth in her pocket and started down the tunnel.

The air got warmer and warmer.

"We must be getting close to the dragon," Josh said.

They came to the iron door. The key was still in the lock. Susan tried the handle. It was too hot to hold. Susan pulled the piece of cloth out of her pocket



and used it like a pot holder. Now she could get a firm grip on the doorhandle. Susan turned it.

The door swung open.

23

Susan and Josh walked into the room. It was so bright they could hardly keep their eyes open. And it was hotter than any place they had ever known.

The light and the heat were coming from the dragon. He was facing one corner of the room. His back was to the door. And he didn't see Susan and Josh.

Someone was talking. Susan's heart gave a jump. She couldn't believe her ears. Josh put his finger to his lips.

It was Mrs. Muldoon's voice they heard. She must be in the corner the dragon was facing.

The witch was talking very fast. "Look at me," she said. "Can't you see I'm not the one who locked you up down here?"

The dragon moved closer to the corner of the room. Susan raced up behind him.

Suddenly she stopped. An awful thought hit her. Suppose it was only *water* in the watering can? Then the dragon would kill her and Josh as well as the witch.

"You're a clever dragon," Mrs. Muldoon said. "Think of all the magic we could do together. Why can't we be friends?"

The dragon gave a snarl. He bent his terrible head over the witch.

Susan swallowed hard. She held out the watering can and sprinkled the dragon's blazing tail.

There was a hissing sound. The fire in the tail went out. Then all the fire in the dragon died down. Susan smelled something like wet leaves burning.

Now the room was dark except for the light from the candle.

"Look." Josh pointed to the dragon.

He was only as big as a baby alligator.

Susan sprinkled him again. The dragon shrank to the size of a lizard.

Susan poured what was left in the watering can on the lizard.

A moment later a little red salamander streaked out of the room.

The witch stepped out of the corner. Her dress was torn and blackened. Her white hair was streaming down. But her wrinkled cheeks looked very pink in the candlelight. And her green eyes were shining.

"There now," she said, "wasn't that fun?" Mrs. Muldoon looked at the watering can. "So that's what that brew does. I wasn't sure."

24

Mrs. Muldoon was in a hurry to get back to her garden. "We have to plant that bush," she said. "It's been out of the ground too long already."

Josh dug a hole near the sunflowers. Mrs. Muldoon took the watering can into the house. She brought it out again to fill the hole before she planted the bush.

The witch stroked her chin. She looked up at the sunflowers and smiled. "You're a friendly bunch," she said. "I'm sure you'll cheer up this unhappy bush. You might even teach her a trick or two." She tipped the watering can.

Josh and Susan jumped back so as not to be splashed.

The witch laughed. "This is only water, dearies. I don't want to risk having the bush shrink. Not after all it's been through." She thought a minute. "But maybe the brew doesn't shrink bushes. Oh, dear, I wish I could remember what I put in it."

Just then Patchwork jumped off the fence into the witch's garden. She raced over to the big hole that had the steps inside it.

"Stay out of there!" Susan ran to grab the cat. She stumbled over the pile of stones. One stone fell into the hole.

Susan rubbed her eyes. "Look!" she said. "The hole is gone!"

Josh and Mrs. Muldoon had finished planting the bush. They came over to see. The ground was as hard and firm as if there never had been a hole there.

The place was covered with a thick patch of weeds.

The witch frowned. "This is just one more of Aunt Martha's sloppy spells. What a mess she made of this garden!"

Susan heard her mother's voice.

"Susan! Josh! Lunchtime! Don't you want a piece of cake?" Mrs. Allen was calling from the other side of the fence.

Mrs. Muldoon tried to cover a yawn. "Run along, dearies," she said. "I could do with a nap."

Josh picked up the garden fork. Susan looked around for the trowel. It was over by the pile of stones. She put Patchwork on the ground. The cat poked at one of the stones. A little red salamander ran out into the open. Patchwork chased it across the garden.

Josh looked after them. "I just hope the dragon doesn't find the magic mint leaves."

Mrs. Muldoon smiled. "They won't do *him* any good. They're another one of Aunt Martha's sloppy spells. Those leaves won't work for anyone over the age of fifteen." The witch clicked her tongue. "They never did *me* any good," she said.

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Mrs. Muldoon yawned again. "Come along, dearies." She held the back door open.

Josh and Susan walked into the big kitchen. The fire on the stove was lit. And the big pot was bubbling away.

When they went through the shadowy dining room Susan looked for the bat. He was sitting in the same place on the narrow shelf above the paneling. This time he unfolded his leathery wings and stretched them.

"Go back to sleep, Herbert," the witch said. "These are friends of mine."

Susan and Josh left the house by the front door. At the bottom of the witch's steps, Susan stopped.

"Josh," she said, "my mother's clothesline is still tied to the apple tree."

Josh grinned. "Maybe tonight we'll go and get it."

Photo by Irving Schild

About the Author

RUTH CHEW is the author and illustrator of many popular children's books including *Witch in the House, The Witch's Buttons, What the Witch Left, The Would-Be Witch* and *The Magic Cave.* She attributes the appeal of her books to the fact that she writes the kind of stories she would have liked when she was a child.

Born in Minneapolis, Ms. Chew grew up in Washington, D.C. where she attended the Corcoran School of Art. She has worked as a fashion artist for department stores, newspapers and advertising agencies, and continues to study art under John Groth and Robert Shore at the Art Students League of New York. The mother of five (three daughters and two sons) and grandmother of two (both boys), Ms. Chew and her husband, Aaron Silver, a lawyer, make their home in Brooklyn, New York.

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